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How Our Far Eastern Policy Led to Viet Nam

This explanation of American policy in Viet Nam was made by William P. Bundy, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, in a recent speech in Washington, Mo.

The first question requires a look at history.

Even when the Far East was much more distant than it is today, we Americans had deep concern for developments there. Americans pioneered in trade and missionary effort with China and in opening up Japan to Western influence. In 1898 we became in a sense a colonial power in the Philippines, but began almost at once to prepare the way for independence and self-government there—an independence promised by act of Congress in 1936 and achieved on schedule in 1946. By the 1930s, we had wide interests of many types in the Far East, though only few direct contacts in southeast Asia apart from the individual Americans who had served over decades as political advisers to the independent kingdom of Thailand.

Events then took a more ominous turn. We became aware that the ambitions of Japanese military leaders to dominate all of Asia were a threat not only to the specific interests of ourselves and other Western nations, but to the peace of the whole area and indeed of the world. China, in which we had taken a lead in dismantling the 19th-century system of foreign special privileges, was progressively threatened and large parts overrun. We ourselves were finally attacked at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines. We responded to aggression by conducting with our allies a major Pacific war that cost the United States alone 272,700 casualties and over a hundred billion dollars.

Our Basic Stake

In the end Japanese militarism was defeated, and the way apparently cleared for an Asia of free and independent national states that would be progressively freed of colonialism, that need threaten neither each other nor neighboring states, and that could tackle in their own way the eternal problems of building political and economic structures that would satisfy the aspiration of their peoples.

That kind of Far East was a pretty good definition of our national interests then. It is equally valid today. We cared about the Far East, and we care today, because we know that what happens there—among peoples numbering 33 percent of the world's population, with great talent, past historic greatness and capacity—is bound to make a crucial difference whether there will be the kind of world in which the common ideals of freedom can spread, nations live and work together without strife, and—most basic of all—we ourselves, in the long run, survive as the kind of nation we are determined to be. Our basic stake in the Far East is our stake in a peaceful and secure world as distinct from a violent and chaotic one. But there were three great flaws in the 1945 picture after the defeat of Japan.

1. In China, a civil war had been raging since the 1920s between the government, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, and the Chinese Communist movement. After a brief and edgy truce during the war against Japan, that civil war was resumed in circumstances where the government had been gravely weakened. We assisted that government in every way possible. Mistakes may have been made, but in the last analysis mainland China could not have been saved from Communism without the commitment of major U.S. ground and air forces to a second war on the Asian mainland. Faced with a concurrent threat from Soviet Russia against Europe and the Near East, we did not make—and perhaps could not then have made—that commitment. And there came to power on the mainland, in the fall of 1949, a Communist regime filled with hatred of the West, with the vision of a potential dominant role for China, but imbued above all with a primitive Communist ideology in its most virulent and expansionist form.

Korea Action Analyzed

2. In Korea, a divided country stood uneasily, half free and half Communist. With our military might sharply reduced after the war, as part of what may have been an inevitable slackening of effort, we withdrew our forces and reduced our economic aid before there was in existence a strong South Korean defensive capacity. With Soviet backing, North Korea attacked across the 38th parallel in June 1950. With the Soviets then absent from the U.N. Security Council, the U.N. was able to condemn the aggression and to mount a U.N. effort to assist South Korea. The United States played by far the greatest outside role in a conflict that brought 157,530 U.S. casualties, cost us at least $18 billion in direct expenses, and in the end—after Communist China had also intervened—restored an independent South Korea, although it left a unified and free Korea to be worked out in the future.

In retrospect, our action in Korea reflected three elements:

A recognition that aggression of any sort must be met early and head on, or it will have to be met later and in tougher circumstances. We had relearned the lessons of the 1930s — Manchuria, Ethiopia, the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia.

A recognition that a defense line in Asia, stated in terms of an island perimeter, did not adequately define our vital interest — that those vital interests could be affected by action on the mainland of Asia.

An understanding that, for the future, a power vacuum was an invitation to aggression, that there must be local political, economic, and military strength in being to make aggression unprofitable, but also that there must be a demonstrated willingness of major external power both to assist and to intervene if required.

3. In southeast Asia, finally, there was a third major flaw—the

Continued

difficulty of liquidating colonial regimes and replacing them by new and stable independent governments. The Philippines became independent and with our help overcame the ravages of war and the Communist Huk rebellion. The British, who had likewise prepared India and Burma and made them independent, were in the process of doing the same in Malaya even as they joined with the Malayans in beating back a 12-year Communist subversive effort. Indonesia was less well prepared; it gained its independence, too, with our support, but with scars that have continued to affect the otherwise natural and healthy development of Indonesian nationalism.

Leadership Falls to Communists

French Indochina was the toughest case. The French had thought in terms of a slow evolution to an eventual status within some French union of states—a concept too leisurely to fit the postwar mood of Asia. And militant Vietnamese nationalism had fallen to the leadership of dedicated Communists.

We all know the result. Even France was unable to defeat the Communist-led nationalist movement. Despite last-minute promises of independence, the struggle inevitably appeared as an attempt to preserve a colonial position. By 1954, it could only have been won, again, by a major U.S. military commitment, and perhaps not even then. The result was the settlement at Geneva. The accords reached there were almost certainly the best achievable, but they left a situation with many seeds of future trouble. Briefly:

1. North Viet Nam was militantly Communist, and had developed during the war against the French an army well equipped and highly skilled in both conventional and subversive warfare. From the start, North Viet Nam planned and expected to take over the south and in due course Laos and Cambodia, thinking that this would probably happen by sheer decay under pressure, but prepared to resort to other means if needed.

2. South Viet Nam had no effective or popular leadership to start with, was demoralized and unprepared for self-government, and had only the remnants of the Vietnamese military forces who had fought with the French. Under the accords, external military help was limited to a few hundred advisers. Apart from its natural self-sufficiency in food, South Viet Nam had few assets that appeared to match those of the north in the struggle that was sure to come.

3. Cambodia was more hopeful in some respects, more remote from North Viet Nam, with a leader in Prince Sihanouk, a strong historical tradition, and the freedom to accept external assistance as she saw fit. From the start Sihanouk insisted, with our full and continuing support, on a status of neutral-

4 Laos, however, was less unified and was left under the accords with a built-in and legalized Communist presence, a disrupted and weak economy, and no military forces of significance.

Action Started in 1954

Such was the situation President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles faced in 1954. Two things were clear — that in the absence of external help Communism was virtually certain to take over the successor states of Indochina and to move to the borders of Thailand and perhaps beyond, and that with France no longer ready to act, at least in South Viet Nam, no power other than the United States could move in to help fill the vacuum.

Their decision, expressed in a series of actions starting in late 1954, was to move in to help these countries. Besides South Viet Nam and more modest efforts in Laos and Cambodia, substantial assistance was begun to Thailand.

The appropriations for these actions were voted by successive Congresses, and in 1954 the Senate likewise ratified the Southeast Asia Treaty, to which Thailand and the Philippines adhered along with the United States, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand and Pakistan. Although not signers of the treaty, South Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia could call on the SEATO members for help against aggression.

Commitment Was Made

So a commitment was made, with the support of both political parties, that has guided our policy in southeast Asia for a decade now. It was not a commitment that envisaged a U.S. position of power in southeast Asia or U.S. military bases there. We threatened no one. Nor was it a commitment that substituted U.S. responsibility for the basic responsibility of the nations themselves for their own defense, political stability, and economic progress. It was a commitment to do what we could to help these nations attain and maintain the independence and security to which they were entitled — both for their own sake and because we recognized that, like South Korea, southeast Asia was a key area of the mainland of Asia. If it fell to Communist control, this would enormously add to the momentum and power of the expansionist Communist regimes in Communist China and North Viet Nam, and thus to the threat to the whole free world position in the Pacific.

Let us look at Viet Nam from the beautiful city of Saigon. I visited Saigon in December of 1963 with five of my colleagues, and spoke at length with Gen. Paul D. Harkins, commander of our Military Assistance Advisory Group, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and many of our American military and civilian men in the field. The most striking thing about Viet Nam is the fact that it is the richest agricultural area in the world. The experts have said that sufficient food can be produced in this area to feed 40 million people. This territory in the southern portion of Viet Nam also permits guerrilla forces to live off the land without a constant resupply to sustain their activities in the field. The area is abundant in geese, ducks, and of course the staple commodity—rice.

During the early phase of the Vietnamese operation against the Viet Cong, our military adviser initiated a policy wherein all of the villages of the country were organized and defended in a unique manner. Instead of letting the farmers fall prey to small marauding bands of Viet Cong, each town was fortified. The valuables were placed in a warehouse or hut in the center of town, and at the first sign of an attack, the villagers would retreat to this redoubt, and a radio call for help was sent to the nearest army force whose immediate response was guaranteed through the use of helicopters and other high-speed aircraft, in conjunction with paratroop operations. When the war was virtually won in the north the Viet Cong were starved out, but in the south they could rely upon the overabundance in the Mekong Delta to support their operation, hence their success in the Saigon area.

Had to Stop War

The war has been further complicated by the very complex situation within the country. You can imagine the problems our advisers had with the turnover of governments. The American advisers had to get military advice to the proper authorities, and to determine who was in power very often caused a cessation of combat operations with the enemy. In effect, the war would stop while the heads of government and the key leaders in the army were changed, and this meant a complete retraining program by the American mission of all military unit heads as well as political subdivision chiefs.

Probably one of the hallmarks of our mission in Viet Nam has been the extreme patience of our American advisers, from our ambassador and military commanders, down to the valiant Americans who spill their blood along with their Vietnamese comrades. The situation to say the least is vexatious but we must always keep our eyes on our strategic role—that of thwarting these Communist advances.

We will be successful. The Vietnamese will win their struggle. However, the road to victory never has been easy. The future may call for more intensive strikes at the base and source of Communist power and aggression in North Viet Nam. The borders of South Viet Nam may have to be sealed to prevent the flow of Communist men and war material to the subversive Communist army. The 1,800 miles of coastline must be patrolled and the pipeline for resupply of North Vietnamese operations on the sea be destroyed.

The American people stand firm behind their President and behind the principles of freedom everywhere.